

How Gender Affects Gossip and Conversation:
Examining the Assumptions in Deborah Tannen's
"You Just Don't Understand!" (1990)

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Tämä kandidaatintutkielma käsittelee sukupuolta ja sen roolia erilaisissa kielenkäyttötilanteissa, erityisesti juoruilussa. Tutkimuksen tavoitteena on luoda ymmärrystä ja nostaa esiin niitä ennakkoluuloja, joita yhteiskunnassa vallitsee sukupuolia ja juoruilua kohtaan.</p> <p>Tutkimus keskittyy löytämään mahdollisia eroavaisuuksia sukupuolien välillä, tarjoten samalla mahdollisia selityksiä aikaisemman tutkimustiedon valossa. Tutkimuksen tuloksia vertailtiin suosittuun, mutta kiisteltyyn Deborah Tannenin <i>You Just Don’t Understand!</i> (1990) teokseen.</p> <p>Tutkimus toteutettiin nettikyselyllä, jota jaettiin erilaisilla sosiaalisen median sivustoilla mahdollisimman laajan otannan takaamiseksi. Vastauksia oli yhteensä 98, joista naisia oli 63 ja miehiä 31. Kyselystä saatua dataa analysoitiin sekä kvalitatiivisesti että kvantitatiivisesti.</p> <p>Kyselyn tulokset eivät enimmäkseen tukeneet Tannenin väitteitä. Esimerkiksi Tannenin mukaan miehet juoruilisivat enemmän yleisistä kuin henkilökohtaisista aiheista, mutta tämä ei ilmennyt kyselyn tuloksista. Lisäksi sukupuolikohtaiset keskustelujen päämäärät eivät suurimmaksi osakseen vastanneet Tannenin odotuksia. Ristiriitoja Tannenin väitteiden ja kyselyn tulosten väliltä löytyi myös henkilökohtaisten asioiden jakamiseen liittyvässä velvollisuudentunteessa.</p>	
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION.....	3
2 BACKGROUND.....	5
2.1 Defining gender.....	5
2.2 The study of gender.....	6
2.3 Features of gossip.....	7
2.4 Criticism of Tannen’s 1990 book.....	9
3 DATA AND METHOD.....	10
3.1 Aim and research questions.....	10
3.2 The data collection and analysis methods.....	10
4 ANALYSIS.....	13
4.1 The respondents.....	13
4.2 Who gossips about whom?.....	13
4.3 Sharing (personal matters) is caring?.....	15
4.4 The good, the bad, the gossip.....	16
4.5 Goals of conversation.....	17
5 CONCLUSION.....	20
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	23
APPENDIX.....	25

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Who do you gossip about?.....	14
Figure 2: What do you think is important when sharing troubles?.....	17
Figure 3: What is most important to you in a conversation?.....	19

1 INTRODUCTION

“In the beginning, there was sex and there was gender.”

(West and Zimmerman 1987: 125).

These concepts – sex and gender – have been distinguished from one another for decades, and the study of latter is still popular. One of the earliest works in the field of language and gender is Lakoff’s *Language and Woman’s Place* (1975). Even though Lakoff’s piece is still being criticized for its generalizations, it should be noted that Lakoff’s work managed to present the topic of gender to a wide audience, launching interest towards sociolinguistic research and gender studies (Coates, 2004: 6). Fifteen years later, Tannen published her work *You Just Don’t Understand!* (1990) which again gained wide attention.

The main inspiration and background of this BA thesis comes from Tannen’s above-mentioned work. Tannen is a linguist with many scholarly credentials and her book spent over a year on the charts of *The New York Times* (Cameron, 1996: 32), so it is fair to say that her work has had many supporters. In her book Tannen analyses the differences in conversation between genders and focuses more closely on the topic of gossip. She uses both fictional and non-fictional pieces as a source along with her own experiences. In other words, the background of her book is not heavily based on scientific methods. Even though many readers do connect with her writing and support her ideas, some scholars have found matters to criticize. Cameron (1996: 34–35) suggests that Tannen’s work has inspired unscientific articles to generalize gender specific behaviour, thus being harmful for the study of gender than being informative. As an example, an article in *Cosmopolitan* ponders why the way how women speak is criticized while using Tannen’s experiences to reinforce the claim that sexism is to blame (Smothers, 2016). Due to various controversies around Tannen’s methods, I wanted to find out whether or not the claims that Tannen has made could be verified with academic research methods. Such a famous piece of work that many people identify with yet still receives wide criticism, is worth testing.

The main aim of my study is to investigate if females and males gossip differently and to find out if females and males have differences in the goals of conversation. The results are then compared with Tannen’s work *You Just Don’t Understand!* (1990). Finally, explanations are offered to enlighten the possible differences found in my study.

The data was collected with a Webropol questionnaire which was published in various social media sites in order to gain respondents from both genders. There were 63 female and 31 male respondents, and the data from their answers were analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The respondents were asked, among other things, about their gossiping habits, their feelings towards sharing personal matters and the most important aspects in conversation.

The study is structured in the following way. Firstly, the study discusses the background theory, explaining gender studies and its developments along with key concepts of this study such as *gossip* and *gender*. Secondly, the method section focuses on explaining how the study was conducted and data gathered, while also introducing the research questions. Thirdly, the analysis chapter presents the results and finally the conclusion summarises the findings, states the conclusion and suggests further research.

2 BACKGROUND

This section defines the key concepts which are crucial to my study, i.e. *gender* and *gossip*. It aims to introduce the academic field of gender studies with previous research and list the main points in the history which influenced gender studies. This chapter also includes earlier criticism towards Tannen's "*You Just Don't Understand!*" (1990).

2.1 Defining gender

Merriam-Webster dictionary (2017) defines *gender* as follows: "the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex". That is, gender is something one identifies with mentally such as being feminine or masculine, which usually responds to one's sex. Sex on the other hand means whether a person is biologically woman or a man. The concept of "*doing gender*" was first introduced by West and Zimmerman (1987) and it has been followed by other researchers. Coates (2004: 138) suggested later that gender is something people "*do*" instead of what people just "*are*". Swann (2011) discusses how troubling *gender* is as a term. She suggests that gender is something "*fluid, contingent and context dependent*" (Swann 2011: 554), such as language. It is also a part of identity, which itself is an ongoing process, which has numerous variables. Nowadays there are not just two genders acknowledged (female and male) but numerous others as well. Tannen (1990) did not explain the construct of gender in her work, which may produce generalization and stereotyping. Stating a gender as given instead of regarding it as a process that person goes through is harmful for gender identity (Cameron 1996: 39–43). Cameron addressed this issue and claimed that it produced overgeneralization and stereotyping, such as "men do this, women do that" (1996: 44).

Furthermore, Freed (1996: 56) argues that people should not be split into two groups, to either women or men. She warns how researchers should be cautious before generalizing without taking "*economic privilege, subcultural phenomena, setting, activity, audience, personality or context-specific communicative goals*" into account (Freed 1996: 56). Swann (2011: 555) introduces a solution to the problem by suggesting that gender should be always included with other aspects of a person. For example, instead of only saying language of "*men*", one should say language of "*working class white heterosexual men*" (ibid). Yet, Swann (2011: 554) also wonders, how is it possible then to decide which one of the previous traits is the one that is affecting language at a moment? This is perhaps the reason why associating gender so close to

sex is easier when studying language differences, since studying only two categories is much effortless than numerous others.

2.2 The study of gender

The study of gender was launched by second-wave feminism around 1960's yet gender did not appear in sociology before 1970's (Pilcher and Whelehan 2017: xii). It was only during the late 1970's when women's studies was acknowledged as a worthy field to study, and around 1990's the study of men and masculinity started to advance (Pilcher and Whelehan 2017: xiii). Later, as the awareness towards inequalities and differences rose between genders, gender studies gained their place (Pilcher and Whelehan 2017: xiii). In the poststructuralist analysis the perception of gender shifted towards a more complexed entity, which is explained more thoroughly in the following paragraphs (Pilcher and Whelehan 2017: xiii).

The study of language and gender has differing approaches based on perspective. When investigating the study of language and gender chronologically, Lakoff's work in 1975 represented the first, deficit approach by establishing a phenomenon called "women's language" (Coates 2004: 6). The data which Lakoff (1975: 46) used in the study was gathered by introspection. Lakoff examined her own speech, the speech of her acquaintances and media samples from commercials on television. According to Lakoff, women use more specific lexical items and "meaningless" particles than men do (1975: 49–50). Lakoff wanted to emphasize how troubling it is to use masculine form as neutral, as found in the example: "everyone take his seat" (1975: 73–74). This creates inequality between genders, making the female form seem more incorrect.

The second approach focused particularly on dominance (Coates 2004: 6). In general, it assumes that both genders work together in order to sustain the male dominance and the oppression of women through the use of linguistic practice (Coates 2004: 6). West and Zimmerman (1987: 128) were among the first researchers to propose this underlining gender specific expectation, which according to them was in fact structured by the society. If people do not adhere to that behaviour of their gender, the motives of that person might be questioned by others (West and Zimmerman, 1987: 146).

The third approach examined difference, how females and males belong to different subcultures (Coates 2004: 6). This is the approach that Tannen (1990) used in her research. Coates suggests that the change from oppression to difference is the result of “women’s growing resistance to being treated as a subordinate group” (2004: 6). Moreover, researchers noticed and focused on the strengths of women’s talk rather than treating it as inferior (Coates 2004: 6). Finally, the fourth approach is called the dynamic approach, which studies the dynamic aspects of interaction (Coates 2004: 6). This approach follows the perspective of social constructionist, which recognises gender identity as a social construct and not “given”. Aforementioned researchers West and Zimmerman also influenced this perspective arguing that gender is something that people do (1987, in Coates 2004: 6).

2.3 Features of gossip

Gossip is often seen as a women’s feature (Coates 2004: 3), yet it has been studied from both women and men (Jaworski and Coupland 2005: 670). Anthropologists have explained how gossip can function as a unifying element of a group (Coates 2004: 104). Coates also wanted to include a different point of view by claiming that gossip in fact is used to destroy gender-specific roles that are attached to women. Studies have shown that women tend to be more polite and hypercorrect with their linguistic behaviour (Coates 2004: 62), so by using gossip women perform against this social norm, thus “behaving badly” (Jaworski and Coupland 2005: 670).

The definition of the word *gossip* should be examined and separated from other terms such as *complaining*, *bitching* and *troubles talk*. According to Sotirin (2003: 19), *bitching* is a sub-genre of gossip, which only focuses on the injustices and violations that the speaker has confronted. *Gossip* differs from *complaining* which is a direct speech act that requires an addressee. *Troubles talk* on the other hand differs from *gossip* because troubles talk focuses on the troubles-teller, unlike in gossip where the object of talk is absent (Sotirin, 2003: 20). Guendouzi (2001: 33) uses the term *gossip* to refer to interactions when the person who is talked about is not present at that moment. The present study has adopted Guendouzi’s definition and introduced it to the respondents in the questionnaire.

What is the attitude towards gossip? Tannen (1990) suggests that the term *gossip* has a negative label because for men it means sharing details of personal matters which they consider to be

more private. She further develops this idea by introducing three different pieces of writing. Firstly, Marge Piercy's novel *Fly Away Home* (1984) has a female character Daria who falls in love with a man who is also interested in the details of other people's lives, unlike Daria's former husband who just called this interest gossip. Secondly, a well-known writer Eudora Welty recalls instances of her life in *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984) when her mother would treat gossip like a disease. Thirdly, an anthropologist and a writer Mary Catherine Bateson explains in *With a Daughter's Eye: A Memoir of Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson* (1984) how her mother did not believe that she would become an anthropologist, since Bateson was not into gossip and details of other people's lives which according to her mother is crucial for her field (Tannen 1990: 96–97).

Through these examples, Tannen shows how negatively gossip can be perceived. Goodwin (2011: 107) who studied a group of children for a year discovered how girls aged from four to 14 used gossip against their competitors in competitive plays. Thus, gossip was used as a weapon, which has a highly negative undertone. In another case Cameron (2011: 260) explains that males are thought to avoid gossiping since its cultural meaning is feminine which would lead into allegations of homosexuality. It is almost feared, seen as something that would break the norm of heterosexuality (Goodwin 2011: 259–260.). However, in a study where male basketball players' conversation was examined, it was clear that they did gossip with each other and even on topics that are usually connected to females, such as team member's clothing and bodies (Cameron 2011: 255). Therefore, gossip is not something that only women do.

The linguist, Guendouzi (2001: 32–33) has investigated with a survey what undergraduate students associate with gossip. Several female-including words were used in responses, including terms "nosy bitch", "bored housewife" or "old women". In another section of the survey Guendouzi asked whether gossip is something that only women do, or something that everybody does. Interestingly, 68% of the female respondents thought it is only women who gossip and only 47% of the male respondents agreed with this. Also, the same number of males (47%) thought gossip to be something that everybody does, while just 31% of the female respondents thought so. Thus, according to Guendouzi's survey, it is not males who define gossip as women's thing, but women themselves. However, Guendouzi (2001: 32–33) believes that the male respondents were being "politically correct" in their answers, which may have influenced the results.

So why do women and men gossip differently? Tannen (1990: 49–63) offers a solution in the goals of the conversation in same-sex and mixed interaction situations. She argues that women seek to connect emotionally, whereas men tend to seek status (Tannen 1990: 63). In Lakoff's (1975) earlier piece power plays a crucial role in language use situations in between genders and Coates (2011: 220) follows this idea by claiming that the aspect of power should always be included when interpreting conversation between mixed sex situations. Coates (2011: 220) argues that women who speak with other women treat each other as equals, but when interacting with men they acknowledge the aspect of dominance. It should also be noted how the same social behavior in conversation can be interpreted as different things. For example, Holmes (1984, in Swann 2011: 552–553) argued that tag questions such as *isn't it?* or *doesn't she?* could be ambiguous in situations where they might as well be considered as interruptive. Tag questions are more common with females, yet males are said to interrupt more often.

2.4 Criticism of Tannen's 1990 book

The earliest critics of Tannen's work (1990) was Troemel-Ploetz (1991). In her review essay "*Selling the Apolitical*" (1991) Troemel-Ploetz had numerous remarks on Tannen's "*You Just Don't Understand!*" (1990). For example, Tannen's book fails to take previous research into consideration and it avoids taking political stance when it was expected to (Troemel-Ploetz 1991: 489). Most importantly, Tannen's work does not address the effect of power and dominance which according to Troemel-Ploetz (1991: 489) creates inequality. Tannen (1990: 50–52) also claims that men and women do not understand each other, because of the different goals they have in conversation, therefore not knowing how to act. On the contrary, Troemel-Ploetz (1991: 495) argues that there is mutual understanding between women and men, but not willingness to act towards that understanding, thus reinforcing the dominating position of men.

3 DATA AND METHOD

3.1 Aim and research questions

The main aim of my study is to find out if females and males gossip and/or use language differently. Therefore, my research questions were the following:

1. Are there differences how females and males gossip? If so, what kind?
2. Are there differences in goals of conversation between females and males? If so, what kind?
3. Are there any other differences in conversation between females and males? If so, what kind?

The first question investigates if female and male respondents gossip with different people and of different targets. Tannen (1990) suggested that the differences in language use occurred because of the differences in the goals of conversation, which the second research question aims to explain. The questions are compared with Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand!* (1990) revealing if the collected data agrees with Tannen's theses. The third research question will address other differences in conversation found in the responses. Then, whether differences between genders are found or not, some possible explanations based on previous research are offered to enlighten the results.

3.2 The data collection and analysis methods

The data for this study was collected with an online questionnaire. The reason why this method of data collection was chosen is because it allows to get respondents quickly and from a wide area. It is also highly anonymous since it does not require face-to-face interaction like for example interviewing does. In addition, questionnaire is a convenient way of collecting statistical data specifically for quantitative analysis (Dörnyei 2011: 104), yet it allows qualitative analysis with data from open questions.

The questionnaire was created with Webropol (<https://new.webropolsurveys.com>) and it was open from January 9th, 2018 to January 23th 2018. The questionnaire was shared on some of the social media profiles of our seminar members including such sites as Twitter, Facebook and

Tumblr. For my topic, it was important to get respondents from both genders, so these media platforms were chosen because they would reach both males and females. I also sent the link to my friends via Whatsapp so they could share it even further. Before publishing it, the questionnaire was piloted firstly with our class. This allowed me to get feedback on questions and correct possible mistakes. Piloting beforehand is important so that the responses of the questionnaire do not suffer for instance from misunderstandings (Dörnyei 2011: 112).

The questionnaire is attached as an Appendix. It begun with an introduction paragraph which stated the purpose of the study and an estimate of the time needed to fill in the questionnaire. It also included my contact information in case of questions concerning the questionnaire. In addition, the definition of gossip was added to every question page so that everyone would have a shared meaning of the topic available while answering. It was also explained that the questionnaire is completely anonymous and the data will be handled confidentially.

The questionnaire had 12 questions. The first question covered background information, enquiring the age, gender, level of education and home country from the participants. The section about home country made it possible to see how far the questionnaire circulated through social media. It also made it possible to see whether there are differences between cultures in addition to gender. However, the background material was kept minimal, which allowed the respondents to stay anonymous and unidentifiable. Six of the questions were open, three questions used likert-scale, and two were multiple-choice questions. Using that many open questions in a questionnaire can be time consuming when analysing the results, but they allow the respondents to answer more freely, enriching the data (Dörnyei 2011: 107). All the questions were mandatory to answer, so it was not possible to skip a question by accident which could have affected the results.

The data has been analysed both quantitatively and qualitatively, in other words this study used mixed methods for analysing the collected data. According to Sandelowski (2003, cited in Dörnyei 2011: 164) this allowed to achieve a more diverse view of my research, while presenting the results in a form which is easier to compare. Quantitative approach focused on the possible difference in numbers between male and female respondents. These results were displayed partly statistically. Qualitative approach gave an insight how the answers varied between genders. Since the questionnaire had many open questions, analysing all the data qualitatively in this paper was not possible due to limited length. The answers to open questions

included opinions, feelings, attitudes and personal experiences. First, the data was read through multiple times and then coded by the themes and key words which occurred the most. Then the most occurring categories were analysed and interpreted. Lastly, these gathered results were displayed and compared in numbers in order to present the findings more concisely.

4 ANALYSIS

This section presents the results and analysis of the questionnaire's data. The chapter is divided into subsections, representing the respondents and studying those thematic categories that arose from the data. The results are reflected in relation to the background theories, mainly to Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand!* (1990). The results concentrate on statistical differences between female and male respondents, while investigating possible explanations.

4.1 The respondents

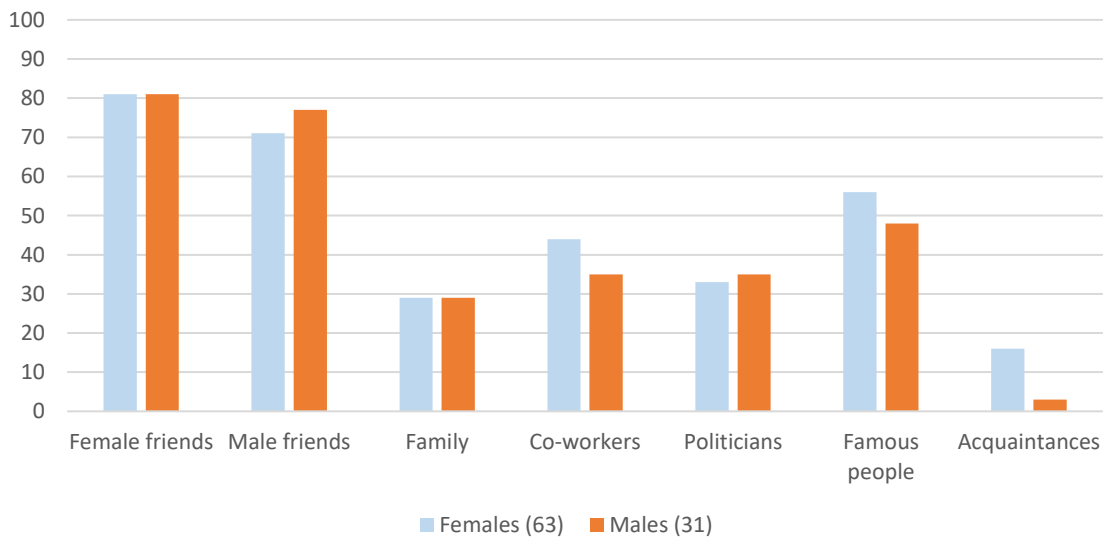
There were 98 respondents in total. 63 respondents were females, 31 males and four other genders (nonbinary, questioning and genderfluid DFAB). Unfortunately, since the sample of other gender respondents was too small, the results would not have been valid if studied on their own. That is why I had to exclude those answers from the analysis. The average age of female respondents was 23 and males' 24. Most of the female respondents were from Finland (86%), and England (8%). Individual females were from Sweden, Ireland, Denmark and Germany. Also most of the males were from Finland (77%), but respondents originated also from Sweden (6%) and Denmark (6%). Individual male respondents were from Germany, Brazil and US. The level of education was more varying. 70% of the female respondents stated that their level of education is university, 17% stated upper secondary level, 5% stated PhDs and 3% university of applied sciences. Similarly, males reported their level of education to be university (71%), upper secondary school (13%), university of applied sciences (13%) and PhD (3%).

4.2 Who gossips about whom?

Cameron (2011: 260) explains how both males and females use gossip, although males are sometimes believed to be avoiding it so they do not get labelled feminine. Femininity would operate against their "*heterosexual orientation*" (ibid). None of the respondents of the questionnaire claimed that they never gossip which follows Cameron's findings. Question 3 (see Appendix) asked who the respondents gossiped with. 92% of the female respondents gossiped with their female friends and 43% with their male friends, and 81% of the male respondents gossiped with female friends and 90% with their male friends. In other words both of the genders were more comfortable gossiping with friends of the same gender as the respondents, but males were more comfortable gossiping with females than females with males.

Question 4 (see Appendix) asked whom the respondents gossiped about. 81% both of the female and male respondents gossiped about female friends and 29% of both genders gossiped about family. 33% of the females and 35% of the male respondents gossiped about politicians, again showing only a slight difference between the targets of gossip. Tannen (1990) agrees that males gossip as well, yet they do not label it as gossiping. The topics of gossip for men are more about public things than personal matters, for example business or sports (Tannen 1990: 101). The results disagree with Tannen (1990), since there are only minor differences between what genders gossip about as seen on Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Who do you gossip about?



In addition to the provided options, the question had an open comment box allowing the respondents to add whatever topics they gossiped about. What was mentioned the most was gossiping about acquaintances, and it created the greatest difference between the genders: while 16% of the females gossiped about them, only 3% of the males did so. Other targets of gossip mentioned only once were people known from childhood, customers or social media bloggers. Yet none of the respondents mentioned gossiping about sports or business. On the basis of the results, it could be argued that for males talking about topics that are more general are not seen as gossip as Tannen (1990: 101) suggested. Although, it does not explain why politicians and famous people were still chosen from the provided answer options.

4.3 Sharing (personal matters) is caring?

Question 6 (see Appendix) inquired whether the respondents felt an obligation to share personal matters. Only about half of the respondents (49%) felt obliged to share personal matters with others. Interestingly, males felt more obliged to share matters than females. 58% of the males felt obliged, 29% not obliged and 13% sometimes obliged. The top-rated reasons for sharing were that they simply wanted to share (26%) and it made the respondents feel better (26%). It also made the respondents feel closer with the people they were sharing matters with (13%). One of the claims that Tannen (1990: 98) illustrates is how women feel obliged to share their personal matters with others. If important events are not shared, it causes hurt and creates distance between friends (ibid).

With female respondents, the majority did not feel obliged to share. 44% of the female respondents did feel the obligation to share, while 48% of the females did not feel obliged to share at all and 8% felt obliged to share matters with others sometimes. With females the difference between yes and no answers was significantly more evenly divided than with males. The reasons for not feeling the obligation were either the lack of need to share or that sharing just felt natural rather than forced action. Sharing matters made females feel closer (24%) and 25% said that they simply wanted to share. According to Tannen (1990: 98) the female respondents should have felt a stronger obligation than the male respondents.

Question 7 (see Appendix) focused more closely on the feelings that lack of sharing created. The failure of sharing personal matters with close ones caused feelings of hurt and betrayal among respondents. Tannen (1990: 98) narrates similar feelings that one woman experienced, having to share uncomfortable personal matters so that her friends would not get offended. 51% of females and 42% of males describe how they would feel hurt and betrayed if the people closest to them would not share personal matters with them. Among females not sharing would indicate lack of trust (32%) and distance between them and the person in question (24%). However, 27% of the females said that they would understand if personal matters were not shared with them. Males had somewhat related feelings with females. 26% of the male respondents stated they would feel lack of trust if personal matters were not shared with them, and 19% of the males would sense distance and loss of connectivity between them and the person in question. Despite of this, 19% of the males stated that whether people want to share

or not is their own choice and 16% would not care at all if personal matters were not discussed with them.

4.4 The good, the bad, the gossip

Does the word “*gossip*” carry a stigma? Tannen (1990: 119–120) argues that people have different definitions of gossip based on their own experiences. One man who thought gossip was all bad had only experienced one specific type of gossip, talking-against instead of talking-about (ibid). The respondents had a negative view on the word gossip as well according to the answers for Question 2 (see Appendix). 87% of the females thought that gossip has a negative label on it, 8% thought it has both positive and negative labels depending on the situation, and 5% thought the word to be neutral. Biggest reasons for the negative label among females was how gossiping is experienced as talking behind someone’s back (33%) and that bad things are said about the target of gossip (29%). Goodwin (2011: 107) mentions how certain type of he-said-she-said gossip can be used as a punishment among young girls, to exclude others from the group. One of the answers for Question 2 (see Appendix) followed Goodwin’s assumptions:

“Negative. Gossip bonds people together creating an us versus them dynamic. Gossip is the result of people being afraid of talking their minds to each other.”
- Female respondent

Males had a similar view on gossip. 87% of the male respondents though it has a negative label, 10% thought it is positive and 3% thought it has a neutral label. As females, males though that the biggest reason for the negative label is the fact that gossiping happens behind someone’s back (23%). The second biggest reason, however, differed from the female perspective. Males thought that the negative label comes from false facts which are then spread (19%). Only 10% of the males were concerned about the fact that bad things are said about the target of the gossip. In addition, Tannen (1990: 119) asserts how a person who gossips negatively about others is likely to gossip negatively about the person who she or he is gossiping with at that moment. According to the respondents, the bad image of the gossiper was not as important. Only 5% of the females and 3% of the males mentioned how gossiping makes the gossiper look bad and untrustworthy.

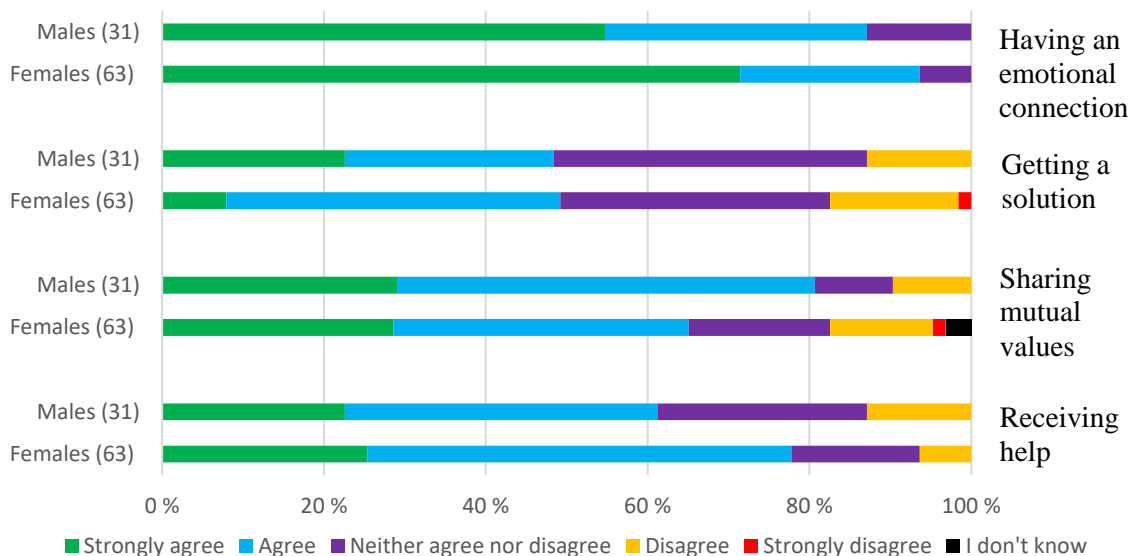
In addition, the respondents were asked to answer how well they agree with the statement “*gossip can be destructive*” on a 5-point likert scale (Question 12, see Appendix). The

respondents were aware of the possible negative side of gossip. 46% of the females and 58% of the males strongly agreed that gossip can in fact be destructive. Concern on the factuality of gossip appeared also in answers to question 2 (see Appendix) that dealt with the labels of gossip. Respondents thought that gossip does not necessarily include facts; therefore, it might cause negativity. 13% of the females considered nonfactual gossip a negative thing and 19% of the males thought so, as already mentioned above. Tannen (1990: 106) used an example of damaging gossip where a politician was *implied* of being a homosexual, and even though the rumours were retracted, the public had already formed their opinions. Personal experiences with this type of negative impact might have influenced the respondents.

4.5 Goals of conversation

According to Tannen (1990: 50–52), one possible reason behind differences on language use between genders is the differing goals of conversations. Males are more likely to try to find a solution to a problem as long as it does not include asking for information or directions. Receiving help from others would indicate that they are higher up hierarchically, which negatively affects the status of power (1990: 62). Females on the other hand seek to connect with their troubles talk while aiming to find mutual values to share. It does not matter if solutions to troubles are not found, as long as the discussion keeps flowing (Tannen 1990: 52). Figure 2 below shows the answers for Question 9 (see Appendix) that asked the respondents what they think is the most important aspect of trouble sharing.

Figure 2: What do you think is important when sharing troubles?



When it comes to receiving help and sharing mutual values, females and males had only slight differences in their opinions: 25% of the females and 23% of the males agreed strongly with receiving help and 29% of both females and males strongly agreed with sharing mutual values while sharing troubles. When the ‘agree’ responses are added to ‘strongly agree’ responses, it is actually males who are more interested in sharing mutual values (males 81% and females only 66%). Interestingly, sharing mutual values gained the only “I don’t know” answers of this question. 3% of the female respondents were not sure if sharing mutual values is important for them in conversation. Based on these results Tannen’s (1990: 50) claim of how females should have been more in favour of sharing mutual values and against receiving help does not hold.

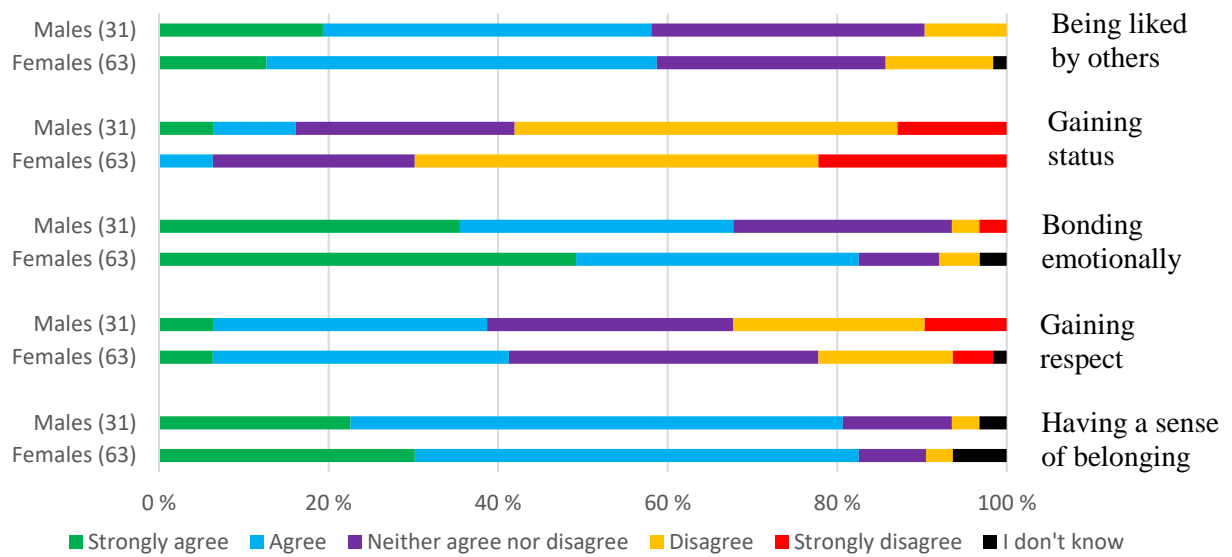
However, questions concerning emotional connection and solution gaining came closer to what Tannen (1990: 50–51) has suggested: 23% of the males strongly agreed with getting a solution when sharing troubles, yet only 8% of the females felt the same. Emotional connection was more important to females as 71% of the female respondents strongly agreed with the claim. Males were also much in favour of having an emotional connection, 55% of them agreed strongly with it, yet far less than females.

Question 5 (see Appendix) also aimed to distinguish differences in the goals of conversation, asking the respondents what they think was the most important thing in a conversation, again using a 5-point Likert scale (see Figure 3). Only 6% of both males and females agreed strongly with gaining respect, and 35% of the females agreed with gaining respect which was actually more than males did (32%). Gaining status was the least favoured goal, yet somewhat more important to males (6% strongly agreed and 10% agreed) than females (0% strongly agreed and 6% agreed). According to Tannen, males wish to be respected by their peers, as females feel it is more important to be liked by others (1990: 108). However, the results do not match with Tannen’s (1990: 108) claims, since both genders thought that being liked by others and especially gaining status was not that important.

Female respondents were not that much interested in being liked by others than male respondents were, conversely 19% of the males strongly agreed with the fact while only 13% of the females did. Coates (2011: 200) also studied conversational habits that females had and the conclusion was close to Tannen’s (1990); according to Coates females sought to “*work together to produce shared meanings*” (2011: 219), where cooperativeness was the key. Coates’ (2011: 200) study targeted only all-female groups, but since my questionnaire did not

specify whether the conversation is mixed interaction or not, it does include possibly both, depending with whom the respondents normally use language with. Almost half of the female respondents of my study (49%) strongly agreed and 33% agreed that bonding emotionally was the most important thing in a conversation and 35% of the males strongly agreed and 32% agreed with the claim, so it was important to both genders but more important to females.

Figure 3: What is most important to you in a conversation?



5 CONCLUSION

The main aim of this study was to find out if females and males gossiped differently, while also investigating if there are differences in conversation between the genders. The results were then compared with Tannen's *You Just Don't Understand* (1990) in order to find out if my findings support her claims.

The first research question focused on possible differences in gossip between genders. Both genders preferred to gossip with friends of the same gender as the respondents were, yet male respondents felt more comfortable gossiping with female friends (81%) than female respondents with their male friends (43%). There was very little variation in the responses on what genders gossiped about. For example, as many females as males gossiped about their female friends (81%) and family (29%). This was against Tannen's (1990: 101) suggestion that males would rather gossip about more general targets of gossip than personal ones. In addition, the reputation of gossip was inspected. 87% of the both genders thought gossip had a negative label, and according to females and males the biggest reason for this was how gossiping happens behind someone's back. However, Tannen (1990: 119) claimed that the negative attitude results from the negative image which the gossiper receives, yet this was the case with only 5% of the females and 3% of the males in my study.

The second research question focused on the goals of conversation. The importance of sharing mutual values was more important to males than females when combining the answers 'strongly agree' and 'agree' (males 81% and females 66%), yet according to Tannen (1990: 52) sharing mutual values should have been more important to females. In addition, as much as 77% of the female respondents strongly agreed and agreed, and 62% of the males strongly agreed and agreed that receiving help is important when sharing troubles. Receiving help should have been a goal that females had avoided more (Tannen 1990: 50) so again these results do not match with those of Tannen's.

Goals of emotional connection and solution gaining followed Tannen's (1990: 50–51) claims partly. Emotional connection was in fact more important to females (71% of the females strongly agreed and 55% of the males strongly agreed) and solution gaining was much more important to males (23% of the males strongly agreed and only 8% of the females strongly agreed), although solution gaining was much more unpopular for males than emotional

connection. Tannen (1990: 108) also claimed that males seek respect among others and females are more concerned about being liked by others. Once again, the results contradicted: gaining respect was as unpopular to both genders (only 6% agreed strongly) and females agreed more strongly (35%) with gaining respect than males did (32%).

The third research question aimed to take other possible differences in conversation between the genders into consideration. In fact, differences were found concerning obligation of sharing: males felt more obliged to share personal matters (58%) than female respondents did (44%), but 29% of the male respondents did not feel obliged when 48% of the females did not feel the obligation. Tannen (1990: 98) suggested that female respondents should have felt the obligation more strongly than males, yet this was not supported by the results.

Since the results of the questionnaire and the way how most of the gossiping habits and conversational goals did not correspond with the claims of Tannen (1990), it can be concluded that her work *You Just Don't Understand* is not a reliable source when examining the differences in language use between genders. One of the reasons is the possibility that the use of gossip has changed through time along with society.

Few things should be taken into consideration when going through the results. First of all, in total of 152 people started filling out the questionnaire, but only 64% of them finished it completely. Perhaps there were too many questions so the questionnaire took too much time to answer. Also, the questions were in English and most of the respondents were Finns – being unable to answer with own mother tongue may affect the will to answer the questionnaire. One question in personal information caused confusion, “Level of education” was apparently interpreted in two ways. Respondents stated either their present school level, or their previous fully completed one. It is however possible to draw conclusions if according to the background information a respondent is 26 years old and still in upper secondary school.

This study presented many other interesting topics which could be studied as well. For instance, it would be interesting to study how social class or cultural background would affect the results instead of gender. This would require a bigger sample than the present one. Also, according to Guendouzi's study (2001: 32–33) almost no one agreed with the fact that everyone gossips, yet none of the respondents of my study stated that they do not gossip. It would be interesting to study this phenomenon as well, also bringing awareness towards gossip and its role in

conversation and relationships. It would have been interesting to let the participants define the concept of gossip themselves before giving it to them, and see how they view it.

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APPENDIX

The Questionnaire:

Gender and Gossip

Introduction:

The purpose of this survey is to examine the relation between gossip and gender. The survey will be focusing on the purpose of gossip and finding out whether or not males and females use gossip differently.

Answering the survey should take about 5-10 minutes. It is completely anonymous and the collected data is handled confidentially. The data will be used in my BA thesis study which is carried out in University of Jyväskylä, Finland. If you have any questions concerning the survey, feel free to contact me: laura.e.poranen@student.jyu.fi

1. Background information

Age:

Gender:

Level of education:

Home country:

(The definition of gossip)

2. Do you think 'gossip' as a word has a positive or negative label? If so, why?

3. Who do you usually gossip with? (You may choose multiple answers)

- Male friends
- Female friends
- Family
- Co-workers
- Other(s), who? _____

4. Who do you usually gossip about? (You may choose multiple answers)

- Female friends
- Male friends
- Family
- Co-workers
- Famous people
- Politicians
- Other(s), who? _____

5. What is most important to you in a conversation? (1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neither agree nor disagree, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree, ?: I don't know)

Having a sense of belonging	1	2	3	4	5	?
Gaining respect	1	2	3	4	5	?
Bonding emotionally	1	2	3	4	5	?
Gaining status	1	2	3	4	5	?
Being liked by others	1	2	3	4	5	?

6. Do you ever feel obligation to share personal matters with the people closest to you? Why / Why not?

7. How would you feel if the people closest to you would not share their latest personal matters with you?

8. Do you like to share your troubles with others? What kind of troubles and with whom?

9. What do you think is important when sharing troubles? (1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neither agree nor disagree, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree, ?: I don't know)

Receiving help	1	2	3	4	5	?
Sharing mutual values	1	2	3	4	5	?

Getting a solution	1	2	3	4	5	?
Having an emotional connection	1	2	3	4	5	?

10. Do you think gossip affects your relationships? If so, how?

11. Is there a certain time and place for gossip? If so, where and when?

12. How do you connect with the following statements? (1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neither agree nor disagree, 4: agree, 5: strongly agree, ?: I don't know)

If I know someone's secret, I have power over them	1	2	3	4	5	?
Personal matters should be shared with close friends	1	2	3	4	5	?
Gossip can be destructive	1	2	3	4	5	?
Sharing secrets makes me feel less lonely	1	2	3	4	5	?
I trust the people who I gossip with	1	2	3	4	5	?
Females gossip more than males	1	2	3	4	5	?
Gossiping is appropriate everywhere	1	2	3	4	5	?
Sharing secrets enforces my relationships	1	2	3	4	5	?
I feel more comfortable gossiping with males	1	2	3	4	5	?